CHAPTER ONE

THE OBJECT

ON THE NATURE OF KNOWLEDGES

Broad generalization is glorious
when it is the inevitable outpressed juice
of painfully matured little details of knowledge.

Peirce\(^1\)

1. Warburgian Microanalysis

The point of view assumed in the present chapter is lexicographic
and extensionalist, since a discussion of the nature of "knowledges",
rather than of knowledge, will be provided. A few words may be useful to explain the peculiarity of this approach. As regards the lexicographic perspective, I expect the reader will soon perceive that this option is not so much due to a methodology still widespread in English-speaking universities, one that privileges the study of linguistic forms above other topics in our discipline, but rather the result of a scholarly examination of the development of the English epistemic lexicon, a development which will in turn be relevant to, and I hope interesting for, the introduction of the topic of this study. By understanding the history of "knowledges"—a technical term in fairly common use among English philosophers during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—and its disappearance after Locke, I shall be able to introduce a number of conceptual distinctions that will be useful in the following chapters. Behind this approach lies an assumption and a polemic. The former is Warburgian: we might be able to understand an issue better if we concentrate on revealing de-

tails out of which the broad canvas is made. Thus, I would describe this chapter as a piece of micrological analysis. The latter is philosophical: the attention to historical data in general conceals a deep dissatisfaction with contemporary analytic philosophy, whose intentional lack of concern for the past I find almost sacrilegious.

As regards the extensionalist approach, I shall say here only that it consists in a proposal, which I shall defend in a moment, in favour of the reinstatement of the plural of "knowledge" in order to convey the meaning of a plurality of instances of objective knowledge. This is an important concept, that will assume a central role in the following chapter, where I shall sketch a model for epistemology.

Altogether, this chapter strives to provide a gentle introduction to some basic epistemological issues and, as Peirce would remark

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\text{no distinction—the reader may assure himself—will here be insisted upon without an adequate motive, even if it be a mistaken one.}^2
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Or at least that is what I hope.

2. Some Linguistic Preliminaries

In the western philosophical tradition, epistemological doctrines have come to be formulated mainly through the lexicons of seven natural languages: Arabic, English, French, German, Greek, Italian and Latin. The lexicon of each of these natural languages contains a class of families of eminently epistemic terms. I say eminently because we may wish to be able to include in each class other words—a doxastic verb, such as "to believe" or an alethic adjective, such as "true"—that can acquire an epistemic value depending on the context. For the sake of simplicity, we may refer to such a lexical area of a natural language as the epistemic lexicon of that language.

Although Fritz Machlup was probably right when he wrote that

philologists, philosophers and sociologists have made much fuss about the "poverty" of the English language relative to other civilised languages\(^3\)